

REPORT SUMMARY

HOUSING FIRST IN EUROPE

An Overview of Implementation,
Strategy and Fidelity

Nicholas Pleace, Isabel Baptista
and Marcus Knutagård

REPORT SUMMARY

- This overview of the development of Housing First in 19 countries in Europe was designed to take a snapshot of how quickly Housing First is being adopted, the extent to which it is present in local, regional, and national strategies and homelessness programmes, as well as to provide a broad overview of fidelity to the model and the scale of service provision. The report attempts to capture developments up to the end of 2018 and, to some extent, look forward to commitments entered into at that time.
- This comparative research drew on a standardised questionnaire to homelessness experts and specialists in Housing First in 19 countries. In several instances, the respondents held senior positions in Housing First programmes, including at national level. The countries were Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the UK.
- This report defines Housing First services as: support for homeless people that closely reflects the core principles and operational practice of the model originally developed by Dr Sam Tsemberis and *Pathways to Housing* in the USA. Housing First is an intensive support model centred on enabling homeless people with *high and complex needs* to live in their own independent homes, exercising a very high degree of control over the nature of the support they receive. Housing First is distinct from rapid rehousing and housing-led services, which also aim to house people rapidly but are low intensity services intended for homeless people with low support needs, or whose needs can be largely, or entirely, addressed by the provision of an adequate, affordable and secure home.
- The homelessness sector varies between countries. In some cases, there is not a clear line between homelessness services and social services (social work) with respect to support and safeguarding of vulnerable adults. In some cases, Homelessness services centre on emergency shelters and, to varying degrees, on single site transitional housing. Other European countries have highly developed homelessness services and strategies. Housing First services have been introduced into countries with markedly different responses to homelessness, alongside significant variations in housing, welfare, and health systems.
- Across Europe, there is a varying extent to which Housing First features in homelessness strategies, programmes, and wider health and welfare policy at local, regional, and national level. The research found that Housing First, as a relatively new development in much of Europe, is sometimes operating on a small scale, is present in some areas but not others, and differs in how it is used alongside other homelessness services, with variation both within and between different countries. Housing First was shown to be highly developed or advancing quickly in some countries but progressing more slowly in others, and in a minority of countries was reported as absent from existing responses to homelessness.
- Housing First was demonstrated as not always operating in contexts where there had been wider systemic changes in responses to homelessness. In some cases, Housing First was observed to be out of sync with other elements of the homelessness sector and existed at the margins of homelessness policy.
- Fidelity to the core principles of the Housing First model could vary between services and between countries. Central and Eastern European countries tended to be reported as having lower levels of fidelity in Housing First services, but variations in fidelity, ranging in their nature and extent, were widespread and exact replication of the original Tsemberis model of Housing First appeared to be unusual. Some countries have developed their own standards for Housing First, although use of the *Housing First Guide Europe* as a reference point was widespread. **Low levels of fidelity sometimes increase the risk of associating the term 'Housing First' with European services that are not Housing First, which could bring discredit to the concept.**
- The bulk of Housing First services appeared to use scattered housing, but there was also some use of congregate or single-site models. In countries with larger social rented sectors, use of social, rather than private rented housing, was widespread.

- Housing First was typically reported as intended for homeless people with high and complex needs, but the ways in which it could be accessed varied. Some services required a psychiatric diagnosis, others focused on long-term homeless people, while others were focused on anyone who was homeless who had significant support needs.
- The reported extent of Housing First provision varied. Housing First is closely integrated into homelessness strategies and programmes in Finland. In some other countries, such as Denmark or France, Housing First is an integral part of responses to homelessness, operating alongside other services, but did not form a large element of service provision. As it is focused on homeless people with high and complex needs, Housing First would not necessarily be working at a very large scale in these countries, even if the entire population with these characteristics were being supported.
- Data on Housing First were variable in standard and often imprecise. Robust and uniform data on service outcomes were also not available. **There is a clear need to improve the quality and comparability of data on Housing First across Europe.**
- Housing First is developing faster in some countries than others. Housing First was reported to be an established, mainstream, part of the response to homelessness in Denmark and Finland. There were clear increases in the use of Housing First in France, Ireland, Italy, Sweden and the UK (particularly Scotland and England). Use of Housing First was reported to be developing less rapidly in Austria (centred only on some regions), Belgium, the Czech Republic, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Spain. Developments were slowest in central and Eastern Europe and Germany, although more attention was being paid to the idea in the latter.
- In many European countries, funding for Housing First was often reported as insufficient and could be unreliable. Larger programmes of Housing First were anchored in well-funded integrated homelessness strategies, as in Denmark, Finland, and France. In Sweden, the UK, and Italy, funding varied in extent and reliability, while in some other countries it was difficult to secure. **Sufficient and sustainable funding is necessary if Housing First services are to be successfully developed and sustained in Europe.**
- Securing suitable and sufficient housing supply - i.e. adequate, affordable homes with reasonable security of tenure - was a challenge across much of Europe. Austria, Hungary, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Sweden, and the UK, which were all described as being in a situation where finding suitable housing for Housing First was 'always difficult'. **Ensuring sufficient, adequate, affordable housing with security of tenure is essential to successfully integrating Housing First into European strategic responses to homelessness.**
- Political support for Housing First was reported as varied. Countries in which Housing First is a part of well-resourced, integrated homelessness strategy are those in which use of Housing First is at its most developed. The resources that came with mainstream political acceptance appeared important in determining the extent of Housing First. Some countries, such as Finland, had broad support for Housing First across key agencies, institutions, and civil society. Networks promoting Housing First, such as Housing First Italia, Housing First England, and Housing First Belgium, existed in several countries.
- There is strong evidence that Housing First provides an effective solution to homelessness among people with high and complex needs, but there is variation in strategic integration, resources and extent to which Housing First has achieved the momentum to become a mainstream response to homelessness. Enhancing data collection, ensuring clarity about fidelity and the role of Housing First in wider strategy, alongside ensuring sufficient resources are in place, including suitable housing, will further enhance the potential for Housing First to reduce homelessness among people with high and complex needs across Europe.